Christmas in the Colonies:

Paganism or Piety

The John Carter Brown Library

CASE 1

In the early sixteenth century the printed "Book of Hours," decorated profusely with relief-cut illustrations, slowly took the place of the illuminated manuscript. An integral part of Catholic devotional literature, the "Book of Hours" contained prayers or offices for use at specific canonical hours. Few books so richly exemplify reverence for Christianity, as can be seen from the following decorative illustrations of the Christmas story.

1. Book of Hours.
Ces presentes heures a lusaige de Romme.
Paris, 1498.

This work, acquired in 1882, is open to the Tree of Jesse (left), which shows the lineage of Christ, and a decorative vision of the Annunciation.

2. Book of Hours.
Ces presentes heures a lusaige de Romme.
Paris, 1505?

This edition, printed on vellum, contains an almanac for the years 1500-1520. It is open to two woodcuts: the visit of Mary to Elizabeth (left) and the Annunciation (right).

3. Book of Hours.
Las horas de Nuestra Señora segun el uso romano.
Lyons, 1551.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

4. Book of Hours.
Heures a lusaige de Paris. Paris, 1522?

Beautiful in its simplicity, this illustration of Christ's nativity sets itself apart from the others by the presence of the star over the stable. Because stars were often associated with paganism, most early illustrations either substituted angels or left the star out entirely. This artist has distinguished himself by choosing a more realistic representation of both the stable and the heavens.

5. Book of Hours.
Heures a lusaige de Romme. Paris, 1520?

This Book of Hours is easily identifiable by its extremely wide border with woodcuts of familiar Biblical scenes and by the almanac it contains for the years 1520-1530.

It is open to the illustration of the shepherds in the field.

6. Book of Hours.
[Heures a lusaige de Troyes]. Paris, ca. 1515.

The visit of the Three Wise Men is celebrated in the Church on January sixth as The Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. For many centuries Epiphany, or, in English usage, "Twelfth Night," was more joyously celebrated than the feast of the Nativity at Christmas. The event is here memorialized upon the glowing page of this Book of Hours.

7. The Self-interpreting Bible: containing, the sacred text of the Old and New Testament.
New York, 1792.

Here the Biblical narrative of the Nativity is illustrated by "The Flight Into Egypt," made by one of the most active of early American engravers, Amos Doolittle of New Haven. The Bible itself was popularly known as "Brown's Family Bible" after the Reverend John Brown who added his "explanatory notes, and evangelical reflections" to this edition.

8. Christian prayers and meditations in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Greeke, and Latine.
London, 1569. Compiled by John Day, 1522-1584.

The engraved borders on the pages displayed, and on the pages immediately preceding and following, present a sequence of events in the Christmas story. The volume is a book of private devotions prepared especially for the use of Queen Elizabeth.

9. Mamusse Wunneetupanatam-we Up-Biblum God Naneeswe Nukkone Testament. Cambridge, 1663. Translated by John Eliot, 1604-1690.

Written in the Massachuset language, this version of the Old Testament is opened to Isaiah 53, probably the best-known messianic passage in the Bible. This is one of the portions of scripture that Handel chose to use in his famous Christmas oratorio, the "Messiah."

10. Biblia Pauperum.
[Scenes from the life of Christ with Old Testament praefigurations and prophecies]. [Germany? ca. 1460-1470].

This is an example of a block book. Such books were popular in the mid-fifteenth century and were made by printing each page from a single woodcut block. It is one of many books designed to teach Bible stories to those unable to read. Shown here are several illustrations leading to and including Christ's nativity.

11. Proprium sanctorum Hispanorum, que generaliter in Hispania celebrantur, ad formam officii novi redactum. Antwerp, 1682.

Opened to the church calendar for the month of December.

12. Officium Sancti Gabrielis Archangeli duplex maius de 18. Martii. Mexico, 1685.

Opened to the passages dealing with the Archangel Gabriel's visit to Zachariah hailing the birth of John the Baptist.

13. Novena al glorioso martyr S. Christoval, abogado contra los temblores, y muertes repentinas. Mexico, 177-?

Hardly less moving than the Gospel story of the Nativity are the legends which grew up in the early centuries of the Church about the childhood and infancy of Christ. Perhaps the best known of these is that of Saint Christopher the Ferryman, who took a child upon his shoulder and found in mid-river that he was bearing a crushing weight, the weight of the world which the Christ Child was carrying in his hands.

CASE 2

14. Hartmann Schedel, 1440-1514.
Register des Buchs der Croniken und Geschichten.
Nuremberg, 1493.

"The Nuremberg Chronicle" is the most profusely illustrated book of the fifteenth century. The woodcuts were designed by Albrecht Dürer's teacher Michael Wolgemut and by Wilhelm Pleydenwurff. The Library owns both the original Latin edition and the German translation which appeared simultaneously in Nuremberg, 1493.

Shown at the top of the left-hand page is the woodcut illustrating the nativity.

15. Jacobus da Varagine.
Here begynnette the legende named in Latyn legenda aurea, that is to say in Englyshe the golden legende.
Westminster, 1493. Translated by William Caxton.

The story of the Nativity, compiled from several sources, was here conveyed to the English people in the days before the Bible had been printed in their language. The woodcut illustration of the lowly birth must be one of the earliest Nativity scenes to appear in a printed English book.

16. Book of Common-Prayer and administration of the sacraments. London, 1662.

The celebrated revision of the Book of Common-Prayer published under Charles II in 1662 presents the circumcision of Christ in strikingly handsome typographical form. The engraving of that scene, shown here, is one of a series of forty plates with which this copy of the book is illustrated.

17. Samuel Urlsperger, 1685-1772.
Die seibenzehnte Continuation der ausführlichen Nachrichten von den salzburgischen Emigranten, die sich in America niedergelassen haben.
Halle, Augsburg, 1752.

Urlsperger became senior pastor at St. Anne's Church in Augsburg in 1723. In 1732 he organized the first migration of the persecuted Salzburgers to Georgia,

where they founded the settlement of Ebenezer. Ausführliche Nachricht is one of the many reports published by Urlsperger about the growth and financial situation of the Georgia settlement.

Shown here is the account of Christmas Day, 1750.

18. Jean Charlier de Gerson, 1313-1429.
Tripartito del Christianissimo y consolatorio Doctor Juan Gerson de doctrina Christiana. Mexico, 1544.

The first book illustration to be published in the Western hemisphere was this representation of the crowned Virgin, displaying, above and below in handsome letters, the momentous greeting to her of Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation--Ave Maria Gratia Plena Dominus Tecum.

19. Ptolemy, fl. 2nd cent.
Cosmographia. Ulm, 1482.

The Palestine displayed in this distinguished map of Ptolemy was the scene of the birth and life of Jesus Christ. The map is derived from an early 14th-century work in which Marino Sanuto, a Venetian statesman and geographer, urged a resumption of the crusades for the liberation of the Holy Land. Knowledge of Palestine gained from the crusades makes this map, in the matter of place names and geographical features, one of the fullest of the period. Its contents were of the first interest to all literate Christians. The place of the Nativity, here spelled "Bethleem," is located on the map at about the center of the right-hand page.

20. Erasmus Weichenhan, d. 1594.
Christliche Betrachtungen über die evangelischen Texte, so man pfleget zu lesen an denen Sontagen und hohen Festen. Germantown, 1791.

Open to the lesson for Christmas Sunday.

21. Lorenzo Antonio Gonzalez de la Sancha.
Villancicos, que se cantaron en la Santa Iglesia Metropolitana de Mexico. Mexico, 1696.

The "villancico" was a metrical composition sung or recited in the churches of Spain and Latin America at Matins on Christmas and other important feasts of the Church. Sometimes these poems were sung in connection with liturgical dramas appropriate to the feast being

celebrated. Each year the forms of this service were freshly prepared with an especially written musical setting. In this volume are the texts without music of some forty separately printed villancicos ranging in date from 1657 to 1730.

22. James Lyon, 1735-1794.
Urania, or a choice collection of psalm-tunes, anthems, and hymns. Philadelphia, 1761.

Here are shown the familiar words to the Christmas carol we sing today "While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks...," although the tune written here is different from that now commonly used.

23. The Worcester collection of sacred harmony...The second edition. Worcester, 1788.

This short Christmas hymn, with words reminiscent of the carol "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," became part of the Library's collection in December of 1928.

24. Daniel Read, 1757-1836.
The Columbian harmonist, No. 1 Containing first. A plain and concise introduction to psalmody fitly calculated for the use of Singing Schools. Second. A choice collection of new psalm tunes of American composition. New Haven, [1795].

Shown here is the beginning of a Christmas anthem by Handel.

CASE 3

The Christmas story is vital to the teaching of Christianity and, therefore, must somehow be taught to children. The following four items are attempts to bring the message of Christianity to children in various mediums such as verse and simple illustration.

25. A New hieroglyphical Bible for the amusement & instruction of children. Boston, 1794.

26. The History of the Holy Jesus. Boston, 1792.

27. A Family book for children. Hartford, 1799.

28. The History of the Holy Jesus. Boston? ca. 1750.

CASE 4

29. Increase Mather, 1639-1723.
A testimony against several prophane and superstitious customs, now practised by some in New-England. London, 1687.

Chirstmas, as we know it today, is built primarily upon nineteenth-century celebrations. In colonial America Christmas was not a significant holiday. In 1644 Parliament, influenced by the Puritans, officially forbade the "pagan" celebration of Christmas. In 1680 Charles II re-established the holiday, but the Puritans in the colonies and Scotland held fast to the notion that the observance of Christmas on December 25 was pagan. As the years wore on and people began to include a bit of merrymaking during the Christmas season, preachers such as the Mathers spoke out against such celebrations. Several of their arguments are presented on the two pages shown here.

30. Cotton Mather, 1663-1728.
Grace defended. A censure on the ungodliness, by which the glorious grace of God, is too commonly abused. Boston, 1712.

Following in the footsteps of his father, Increase, Cotton Mather spoke out strongly against the traditional merrymaking associated with Christmas. He speaks to this issue in section IX to which the volume is opened.

31. Cotton Mather, 1663-1728.
Winter piety. ...A serious Christian may propose to meet with his Blessed Saviour, at the temple in the winter. Boston, 1712.

While not speaking directly to the issue of Christmas, Mather discusses the basic problem of Christians trying to remain pious at a time when paganism is most seductive.

CASE 5

Shakespeare more than once referred to Christmas in his plays and poetry. Two instances are shown here: Love's Labour's Lost and Hamlet. Of the two editions of Hamlet presented, the Boston, 1794, edition completely omits the reference to Christmas, although there is no indication in the front matter that the volume was abridged.

32. William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.
Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, and tragedies. The second impression. London, 1632.

The second folio is open to the speech of Biron beginning "At Christmas I no more desire a rose..."

33. William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.
Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories & tragedies. London, 1623.

This is the famous "first folio" of Shakespeare's works. It is opened to the speech of Marcellus at the end of Scene 1, which begins "Some sayes, that euer 'gainst that Season..."

34. William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: A tragedy. ...As performed at the theatre in Boston. Boston, 1794.

Here the two speeches by Horatio at the end of scene 1 have been combined, eliminating entirely the mention of Christmas by Marcellus.

35. John Milton, 1608-1674.
The poetical works of John Milton. Consisting of Paradise lost and regained. Boston, 1796.

Opened to the Christmas story, told in the iambic pentameter of Milton's Paradise Regained.

36. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1651-1695.
Poëmas de la unica poetisa americana, musa dezima. Barcelona, 1691.

Juana Inés de la Cruz, celebrated poet, was a Mexican nun. Like Anne Bradstreet, she was honored with the title "The Tenth Muse." Open to her "Villancicos" (see number 21).

37. Anne Bradstreet, 1612?-1672.
Several poems compiled with great variety of wit and learning. Boston, 1758.

Anne Bradstreet came to Massachusetts when she was eighteen years old. She was the first English woman in America to publish a book of poems, dealing often with natural philosophy, physics and human nature.

Open to the "winter" section of her "Four Seasons of the Year."

38. The Lady's magazine; and repository of entertaining knowledge. Vol. I.
Philadelphia, 1792.

A valiant attempt is made in this periodical to recognize the literary merits of eighteenth-century women. It is opened to a poem entitled "Winter."

39. Matthias Claudius, 1740-1815.
Asmus omnia sua secum portans, oder Sämmtliche Werke des Wandsbecker Bothen V. Theil.
Hamburg, Wandsbeck, 1789.

Der Wandsbecker Bote was a weekly periodical published (1771-1775) by Matthias Claudius, who wrote most of the contents. Acquired by the library because of the poem on slavery that it contains, the work is now opened to his lyrical rendition of the Christmas story.

CASE 6

40. The Massachusetts Centinel. Vol. VI, number 27.
Boston, 1786.

One of the things now commonly associated with Christmas is shopping. In this December 23 issue of The Massachusetts Centinel, the section entitled "Levity" offers a humorous sidelight to shopping in the eighteenth century.

41. The Rhode-Island almanack for the year, 1728. Being the first ever printed in that colony. Newport, 1728.

A facsimile, published in Providence in 1911. The Almanac alludes to some of the controversial Christmas customs in the comments with which Poor Robin surrounds December. Along the outside we find a reference to feasting and within can be found a reference to logs for the fire, whispering remembrances of the Yule log.

42. Susannah Carter.
The frugal housewife. Boston, 1772.

One of the most favored traditions of the Christmas holiday is the practice of feasting. In this eighteenth-century cookbook the proposed menu for December includes both ham and fowl, the two dishes most commonly served at current Christmas dinners. The engraving of various types of fowl on the right was done by Paul Revere.

43. George Washington, 1732-1799.
[Original autograph letters, from General Washington to Joseph Reed, during the American Revolution]. Cambridge, 1775.

Some colonists had other concerns at Christmas time, as can be seen in this letter from George Washington written on Christmas Day. Although his chief concern is military affairs, he does close his letter with, "I very sincerely offer you the compliments of the season & wish you, Mr. Reed, & your Fireside, the happy return of a great many of them."

44. Mourt's relation.
A relation or journall of the beginning and proceedings of the English plantation settled at Plimoth in New England. London, 1622.

Referred to by Sabin as the "cornerstone of a New England library," Mourt's Relation is a work of primary importance to the scholarship of the Plymouth colony. It was the first book published in Great Britain that gives an account of the founding of the Plymouth colony. The work is opened to the passage describing the Pilgrims' first Christmas in the New World.

45. A.E. Denis Lee-Dillon, 16th Viscount Dillon, 1812-1892. A winter in Iceland and Lapland. Vol. I. London, 1840.

Here, on page 163, one sees how the image of Christmas has changed a century later. On the pages to follow the details of the celebration are given, which included much feasting, music, and dancing.

46. Julius, Ritter von Payer, 1842-1915. New lands within the Arctic circle. Narrative of the discoveries of the Austrian ship "Tegetthoff" in the years 1872-1874. New York, 1877.

In this book of arctic voyages it is obvious that the celebrations have extended themselves to Christmas Eve as well as Christmas Day.

47. Frederick Albert Cook, 1865-1940. Through the first Antarctic night 1898-1899: a narrative of the voyage of the "Belgica." New York, 1909.

By the time this work was written, Christmas had become an important festival. Here the absence of a regular Christmas celebration is felt strongly by the "Belgica" crew.